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ABSTRACT

Religious organizations have played an important part in the national movement to combat sex and violence in television programing. Attempts by religious organizations to exercise some control of the visual media began in 1907 with a concern for movies and has continued to the present. Although many churches and church organizations have expressed concern about the amount of sex and violence on television, fewer have organized particular movements to bring about change. Campaigns have included organized letter writing to broadcasters, advertisers, and regulatory commissions; boycotts of sponsors of programs found to be objectionable; and boycotts of television programs and stations. Some denominations and special interest groups provide packets of material to those interested in bringing about changes. Television networks report that some of these tactics have been effective and will continue to be so long as those asking for change can demonstrate economic power. (TJ)

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FREEDOM OF INFORMATION CENTER REPORT NO. 416

RELIGIOUS GROUPS V. TV'S SEX, VIOLENCE

This report was written by Jack Schicht, a M.A. candidate at the University of Missouri School of Journalism.

Introduction

"Television may be the most pervasive institution in American society, but that is no reason to surrender our responsibility to make choices about the quality of life we want for our children and ourselves."[1] — Stewart M. Hoover, consultant for media education and advocacy for the Church of The Brethren.

". . . programming to please pressure groups will emasculate television."[2] — Fred Silverman, chief executive officer of NBC.

* * *

The statements of Hoover and Silverman are representative of the divergent points of view in an ongoing fight waged by a number of religious organizations to combat what is perceived as excessive violence and sex in television broadcasting.

The battle is being fought on a number of fronts. Tactics are both active and passive. Some religious organizations, notably the United Church of Christ, the United Methodist Church, the Southern Baptist Convention and the National Federation for Decency, are among the current leaders in the national fight to curb violence and sex in television programming. But other religious organizations — either because of their organization or because of their perception of the problem — are devoting little or no time or money to help wage the battle. There are, in short, few generalizations we can make about religious organizations vis-a-vis the multi-faceted movement to curb violence/sex in television programming.

The Movement's Roots

Although the emergence of religious organizations as pressure groups in this area is basically a development of the late 70s, attempts by religious organizations to exercise some control on visual media date back prior to 1907, when the city of Chicago enacted the first municipal ordinance empowering a censor to determine whether motion pictures were morally fit for the public to see. Shortly thereafter, similar review boards were established in other cities and states, and in 1909, what later became the National Board of Review of Motion Pictures began operations.

The National Board, however, had no legal power to mandate changes in film. Thus, in 1932, nearly 40 national religious organizations and educational groups adopted resolutions calling for some form of federal regulation of the motion picture industry.[3]

Two years later the motion picture industry adopted a code that proved to be an enforceable means of self-regulation.[4] The code actually was introduced in 1930 by Will H. Hays, president of the Motion Picture Producers and Distributors of America. But it was not until 1934 — after the emergence of the Roman Catholic Legion of Decency — that the MPPDA saw the need to embody the Hays proposal for self-regulation.[5]

The Legion of Decency succeeded in its express purpose of pressuring the film industry to "mend its ways" by utilizing the full machinery of the Catholic Church to mount an intensive campaign against what it perceived as essentially immoral doctrines prevalent in the motion picture media.[6] In short, the Legion of Decency succeeded in focusing public attention on the problem to an extent never before accomplished by any pressure group.[7] By imposing a single, national rating standard, but still relying on local pressure, the Legion of Decency accomplished its task in only one year, whereas Protestant groups had failed to make any real gains in 25 years.[8] A successful precedent had been established.

Of even more importance to religious organizations in the late 1970s was the landmark WLBT-TV case of 1964-69. The United Church of Christ's office of communication joined with two black citizens in successfully petitioning to deny an FCC license renewal for Lamar Life Insurance Co., the licensee of the Jackson, Miss., television station.[9]

The case proved to be significant for two reasons: (1) It established the right of citizens — and religious organizations — to participate in Federal Communications Commission proceedings. (2) It served as an example for other religious organizations, showing that religious organizations could effect media change.

How Churches Perceive the Problem

How a church perceives its role in the movement to curb violence and sex in television programming determines to a large degree how that church responds with action.

Summary: Religious organizations — churches and special interest groups — have played an integral role in the national movement to combat sex and violence in television programming. This report presents an overview of their role in that movement.

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The perceptions are varied:

The Reorganized Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints, for instance, has taken no official stand on whether it considers the amount of sex/violence on television as excessive.[10]

"No doubt many of our members, including this one, would answer 'yes,' " said Maurice L. Draper, director of the church's public affairs division. "There is no formal action by the church except to state general principles about ethical and moral standards."

The Presbyterian Church in America, a denomination founded in 1973, likewise has never officially addressed the question of excessive sex/violence.[11] The church, said spokesman Morton H. Smith, "has not taken any actions in this area, and has no committee studying the matter or making plans in this area. No doubt individuals have and do react to particular programs."

The Conservative Baptist Association of America also has not taken an official stand on the matter due to organizational reasons.[12] Said Ralph R. Monsen, director of chaplaincy and administrative services: "We are a movement rather than a denomination, and each church is fiercely independent. Therefore this (question) would more appropriately be directed to each church within our movement."

Falling into this same category is the First Church of Christ, Scientist.[13] Said A.W. Phinney, manager, committees on publication:

> The Church of Christ, Scientist, is deeply concerned with this and the many other challenging social and moral issues confronting society. But as a matter of general policy, it does not take official denominational positions on such issues.
>
> However, from time to time, **The Christian Science Monitor**, which is an integral part of the church, has had editorials and news stories dealing with the quality and content of television programs. Again, its editorial positions do not represent official church policy, but they reflect the interests of the church and Christian Scientists alike in seeking practical and healing solutions to this problem.

The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints (Mormons) is "deeply concerned about the amount of sex and violence on television," said Charles Gibbs, the church's assistant director of press relations/electronic media.[14] However, the church has taken no official stand.

"For the Mormons, one of our very basic tenets is that the individual is a free agent," said Gibbs. "These are the kinds of decisions persons must make unto themselves."

But neither does the church discourage members from participating in pressure group activities. "We as a church have never encouraged boycotting products, but there have been movements by members of our faith to turn sets off and boycott kinds of things," said Gibbs.[15]

Freedom to act under the umbrella of the church has even included censorship. One recent example concerned "I, Claudius," a public television series that came under fire from some groups and individuals for its sexual explicitness. "The PBS affiliate, which we own through Brigham Young University [in Provo, Utah] chose to edit and finally drop the series," said Gibbs. "In that case, it was a station management decision based on the content of the show."[16]

One of the churches to speak out officially on the subject of sex/violence in television programming is the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ). In 1977 the church's general assembly approved a resolution urging a reduction in "the excessive and gratuitous violence on TV . . . ."[17] The resolution also outlined specific ways to combat excessive violence and sex; these will be examined in detail later.

The resolution cited both religious and sociological examples in justifying the call to action. It specifically noted that:

> • television is a dominant and pervasive communication medium . . .
> • the average high school graduate is exposed to 18,000 television murders . . .
> • the U.S. Surgeon General's Scientific Advisory Committee on Television and Social Behavior reported in 1972 'a causative relationship between televised violence and subsequent anti-social behavior' . . .
> • the studies of Dr. George Gerbner, dean of the Annenberg School of Communication at the University of Pennsylvania, purport to show that even adults who watch a lot of television have a fear of crime that exaggerates reality . . .
> • in the ethics and teachings of Jesus Christ, whose name the church professes and whose life it tries to exemplify and share with others, violence is not an appropriate human response to conflict.[18]

Another church to publicly speak out on the subject is the Lutheran Church— Missouri Synod. In a resolution adopted in 1969, the church expressed concern that "pornography, nudism, and sexual perversions are increasing at an alarming rate and corrupting especially the minds of young people . . . ." The resolution also noted that "the exploitation of violence and sex in print, films and stage productions is causing a sharp decline in moral standards."[19]

To improve the moral climate, the church encouraged families to discriminate in what is read and viewed; encouraged members "in their witness to the communication industry and society at large in this respect"; and encouraged more Christians to work in the communications industry and promote high moral standards.[20]

The Seventh-day Adventist Church, likewise, considers the amount of sex/violence on television as excessive, but has never engaged in any formal protests.[21]

"Adventists are periodically reminded to boycott every questionable program, but in addition are reminded that Christians will not wish to waste time watching even those programs which may not be packed with sex/violence," said Victor Cooper, associate director of the church's communication department.[22]

The Episcopal Church, in its resolution against violence approved by the church's General Convention in 1976, sought to "search out the causes of such violation of Christian practices . . . and protest against unacceptable displays of horror and cruelty in the media."[23] However, like other churches, the Episcopal Church does not take an authoritative stance with parishoners. " . . . we try to educate our constituencies so that they make their own choices when it comes to choice of movies, television and radio," said Margaret E. Green of the church's communication division.[24]

Broader in scope is a resolution adopted by the United Methodist Church in 1976. The resolution on "The Church in the Mass Media Culture" opposes censorship while reaffirming "that all communications must take place within a framework of social responsibility."[25]

The resolution also reaffirms the "right and responsibility of media professionals to determine the societal and moral content of mass media," but at the same time reiterates the

church's opposition to "the practices of those who use media for purposes of human exploitation."[26] The church decries not only "emphasis on violence" and "pornography," but also 12 other perceived media transgressions, including stereotyping, "appeals to self-indulgence," "presenting consumerism as a way of life," "treating news as entertainment," and "an overriding concern for maximizing profit."[27]

A distinction must be made in discussing the Southern Baptist Convention, the nation's largest Protestant denomination with an estimated 13 million members. The Christian Life Commission, the denomination's social ethics agency, has given "extensive attention to matters related to television and morality," said Harry N. Hollis Jr., director of family and special moral concerns. However, "the policy of the Southern Baptist Convention is such that no agency or individual can speak for the Southern Baptist Convention or for individual churches," Hollis added. But "there is a general consensus, I believe, among Southern Baptists that something needs to be done to make the television networks more responsible to the American people. We are working toward this end."[28]

The United Church of Christ in 1977 officially addressed itself to the problem. The Rev. Dr. Everett C. Parker, director of the church's office of communication, called (New York **Times**, 7-5-77) the statement approved by the church's general synod the strongest ever adopted by a major religious body on the issue of violence and sex in television. He said his office would use the document as a basis for working with the industry to bring about change through persuasion.

The pronouncement denounces television for its "pathological preoccupation" with violence and sex, and calls on all elements of the church to interest themselves in the governmental and private decisions that shape programming, to resist the use of gratuitous violence and the exploitation of sex in programming, and "to demand programs that portray human life realistically and honestly in all its facets, including conflict and sex."[29]

In a background statement to the pronouncement, the office of communication noted:

> When excessive violence and sex are at the heart of television's portrayal of life, a serious threat is posed to all persons in our society. Churches are obliged to oppose such programming. At the same time churches must be equally concerned that their mode of opposing immoral television programming does not violate Constitutional provisions for freedom of speech and of the press.

The pronouncement refers implementation of the statement to the office of communication, which, in turn, involves other agencies of the church that might help. The pronouncement also notes that the office "works daily with commercial broadcasters," helps produce prime-time programming with them, and says that, as a result of the office's "precedent setting activity with the FCC, the courts and Congress," the office has the knowledge and experience to deal with the issue.[30]

It also should be pointed out that numerous denominations have analyzed the role of the individual or family vis-a-vis sex/violence in television programming through articles in church magazines or brochures. In most cases, the messages either called on networks to reduce the amount of violence/sex in programming or criticized programming while at the same time calling for a greater awareness on the part of the viewing public. Three publications that have devoted space to articles of this type on a regular basis are **America**, **A.D.** and **The Christian Century**.

To summarize, there is no concerted movement by religious organizations to control the amount of sex and violence on television. Each denomination sees its mission in a different light, ranging from active to passive.

Perhaps a more basic reason for lack of action on the part of many religious organizations can be explained in terms of freedom. Churches, which enjoy the protection guaranteed by freedom of religion, cannot safely advocate restrictions of the rights of others without endangering their own freedom.[31]

The Overall Movement

Attempts by religious organizations to combat sex/violence in television programming cannot be viewed separately from the activities of other pressure groups during the 1970s, notably the National Parent-Teacher Association and the American Medical Association. Therefore, we need to briefly summarize the overall movement.

In 1954, Sen. Estes Kefauver sponsored the first in a line of congressional inquiries into the question of television's effects on social behavior. As sales of television sets increased in the 1950s, so did violence, due to the emergence of the Western and private-eye police dramas.

Sen. Thomas Dodd conducted more congressional hearings in 1961 and 1964. In 1968, in the aftermath of numerous riots in big cities, the National Commission on the Causes and Prevention of Violence examined the role of the mass media in the increase of crime.

In 1969, Sen. John Pastore called on the U.S. Surgeon General to determine the harmful effects, if any, of television violence. Numerous studies in previous years had a way of canceling each other out; many found excessive viewing of violence to be generally harmful, but other studies concluded the opposite.[32] The Surgeon General's report, released in 1972, proved inconclusive. On one hand, the study pointed to a casual but modest relationship between television violence and aggressive behavior in children.[33] But on the other hand, an official summary of the 43 research reports included in the study concluded that "the possible role of mass media in very early acquisition of aggressive tendencies remains unknown.[34]

Pressure group activity increased in 1976:

- In late summer, the National Parent-Teacher Association unveiled plans for a year-long program to pressure broadcasters to reduce TV violence. Included in the program were a series of eight public hearings, an action plan, a training program and instructional materials.
- The J. Walter Thompson advertising agency, the nation's second largest, reported that a significant number of consumers were avoiding programs considered too violent, and were not buying products advertised on such programs. As a result, the agency advised clients to "evaluate the potential negatives of placing commercials in programming perceived as violent."[35]
- The American Medical Association renewed its attacks by approving a resolution labeling television violence as "a risk factor threatening the health and welfare of young Americans."[36] In addition, the AMA awarded a $25,000 grant to the National Citizens Committee for Broadcasting in support of that group's TV violence monitoring activities.

The movement reached its peak in 1977:

Activities by pressure groups, including several religious ones, received publicity in several magazines with nation-

wide circulation, including Time, Newsweek, U.S. News and World Report, and Business Week.

• Several major advertisers announced plans to revise their advertising policies after the AMA asked 10 major corporations to stop sponsoring violent shows.

• The NCCB reported that nine of 12 sponsors of hard-action TV shows in 1976 greatly reduced their advertising support of "aggressive personal violence" in programming during the 1977 season.[37]

• The House communications subcommittee went on record declaring TV violence "cause for serious concern and remedial action," but recommended that nothing be done by Congress other than supporting more research in the area.[38]

• The National Association of Broadcasters agreed to develop a new set of guidelines on sex/violence in programming.

• A Gallup poll showed (Miami **Herald**, 2-17-77) 67 percent of parents believed in a relationship linking TV violence with crime and anti-social behavior. Seventy-one percent of the parents interviewed favored showing violent programs only after 10 p.m., but only 35 percent favored removing from television all shows that portray violence.

Fall programming in 1977 featured fewer murders, beatings and stabbings. In fact, the incidence of violence on television fell sharply below (St. Louis **Globe-Democrat**, 4-3-78) its peak of 1976, according to a study sponsored by the American Medical Association and the National Institutes of Health. However, a new problem appeared on the horizon.

In August 1977 a coalition of 10 national religious and civic groups launched a campaign to attempt to force ABC-TV to cancel its new adult comedy series, "Soap," even before its debut. Eventually, pressure from advertisers forced the network to alter the concept of the show from an adult comedy emphasizing sex to a whodunit.[39] The experience proved valuable for the religious organizations. They learned the most effective way to influence network programming is through advertisers, not network executives.[40]

Since 1978, the thrust of television programming has remained basically non-violent, but with continued emphasis on sex — be it implied ("Three's Company") or visual ("Charlie's Angels"). The latest battle lines are being formed over programming that explores heretofore taboo subjects. A prime example is CBS's October 1979 dramatization of Pete Hamill's boxing novel, "Flesh and Blood," a four-hour adaptation that aroused the ire of the National Federation for Decency and other religious organizations by presenting a study on incest.

A Study in Tactics:

Religious organizations have attacked the perceived problem through a number of tactics, including economic boycotts, letter-writing campaigns, protesting directly to networks and sponsors, purchasing stock in companies or networks to more effectively apply pressure, addressing the problem in church publications, coordinating efforts with non-religious pressure groups and initiating viewer awareness programs. Some religious organizations have utilized a number of these tactics, while others have focused on one or two methods.

A: Efforts of Individual Denominations

The Lutheran Church — Missouri Synod, the Episcopal Church, the First Church of Christ, Scientist, and the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) characterize attempts by religious organizations to effect change at a low level.

The Lutheran Church — Missouri Synod this fall ran a three-part series, "Television: A Treacherous Teacher," in its official monthly publication, **The Lutheran Witness**. The series focused on (1) stereotypes, myths, values; (2) violence, sex, side-effects; and (3) advertising, resource groups for change. Much of the source material for the articles was taken from the "Television Awareness Training" manual developed through the Media Action Research Center, Inc. (The T-A-T manual will be discussed in more detail later.) The series represents one of the best attempts by a religious publication to analyze the continuing controversy of morality in television programming.

The conclusion of the series, in a call for action, listed six organizations that Missouri Synod Lutherans might consider joining: Action for Children's Television, the National Parent-Teacher Association, the National Federation for Decency, Parent Participation Workshops, Media Action Research Center and Morality in Media. The article stated:

> Other groups do research, change laws, picket, work to revoke stations' operating licenses, and educate parents and children to good selection and awareness . . . [the above] is a list of organizations you might join in the fight **against** bad programming and **for** good programming that promotes Christian and moral values.[41]

Like other churches, the Episcopal Church is a cooperating organization in the Television Awareness Training workshops. Perhaps the only other significant development within the church worth listing is a resolution adopted by the church's executive council in February 1977 in support of a shareholder resolution filed with Procter and Gamble Co. at the time by the Church of the Brethren, Sisters of Charity of St. Vincent de Paul, N.Y., and the Sisters of Mercy. The shareholder resolution requested the company not to allow its advertisements to appear on television programs containing excessive and gratuitous violence.[42]

Even though the First Church of Christ, Scientist, has not taken an official stand denouncing excessive violence/sex in television programming, pressure has been exerted. The Christian Science Board of Directors in recent years has taken "the unusual step of writing to the presidents of the three major networks," said A.W. Phinney. He added:

> They [board members] expressed concern over the amount of violence and immorality on television and suggested specific steps to take in curbing these offenses. This correspondence, however, really cannot be considered a formal church protest, but rather a sharing of ideas and an appeal to correct a serious situation.[43]

In its 1977 resolution seeking to reduce the amount of violence on television, the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) outlined specific courses of action:

• Cooperation with the PTA, NCCB and "like-minded groups."

• Monitoring of television shows by congregations and members, with a subsequent letter-writing follow-up to commend sponsors and networks for non-violent programming and to criticize networks and sponsors of violent shows.

• A listing of objectionable and acceptable programs and their advertisers in church publications.

• Urging units of the church and members owning stock in networks or companies that advertise on television to exercise their shareholder rights in support of non-violent viewing.[44]

* * *

Efforts by the Roman Catholic Church to combat violence/sex in TV programming have been waged by a number of church agencies or organizations, most notably the United States Catholic Conference and the National Council of Catholic Bishops.

In August 1973, the U.S. Catholic Conference protested a CBS television network decision to rebroadcast two "Maude" shows dealing with abortion and vasectomy. The pressure proved effective: 38 network stations opted not to run the two programs, five more switched them from the early evening viewing hours, one provided prime time for the presentation of an opposing viewpoint and all but one of the scheduled national advertisers withdrew sponsorship of the programs.[45]

The two Roman Catholic agencies responded with intensity to the "Soap" controversy of 1977. The U.S. Catholic Conference saw (**Christian Science Monitor,** 8-15-77) the show as a "new debasement of the medium through a contempt for human beings." The conference went so far as to call for the removal of the show from the air.[46] The National Council of Catholic Bishops joined (Los Angeles **Times,** 9-5-77) three other religious organizations in urging members to watch the show's first episodes and then tell local stations what they thought.

Two years earlier, the conference joined forces with Morality in Media in launching a two-pronged attack on sex/violence and the administration of the "family viewing" period on television. The conference's administrative board issued a 22-page statement that said, among other things, that the network structure is such a "foreboding and complicated maze" that it guarantees that "insulated from public scrutiny, top management may, without fear of challenge or other encumbrance, pursue the uniquely important broadcasting goal of maximizing profits."[47]

Other Catholic organizations also have spoken out on the subject:

• The Los Angeles Catholic Archdiocese protested alleged censorship of public views by the television industry by observing a "TV blackout day" on May 23, 1978. The Rev. Joseph Pollard, one of the organizers, said "the real interests of top media management are not art, freedom and education, but competition, ratings and profit."[48]

• The Knights of Columbus Supreme Council, in a resolution adopted in August 1977, vowed to "attack TV through sponsors" if violence is not reduced. The resolution called for persuasion as the method of attack, but urged product boycotts as well if necessary.[49]

* * *

"Help for TV Viewers," a packet of instructional materials, represents one of the main thrusts of the Christian Life Commission of the Southern Baptist Convention. The packet embodies a strategy developed in 1976-77 by the CLC as part of a larger project that included public hearings, surveys, monitoring programs and discussions with television industry leaders.[50]

"Help for TV Viewers," initially distributed to some 35,000 Southern Baptist leaders, urges members to:

• Get involved in a group working to improve television.

• Telephone stations and local sponsors to communicate their views.

• Refuse to buy products from sponsors of programs that are morally objectionable and socially irresponsible; similarly, oppose companies, i.e., at stockholders' meetings, that continually sponsor morally objectionable television shows.

• Write letters to express their convictions.[51] Similar brochures outline courses of action for families and churches.

Also included in the packet are the addresses of the major networks, FCC, FTC, non-religious pressure groups (PTA, NCCB, ACT), trade associations, newsletters, magazines and 10 of the top TV advertisers.

The packet also includes:

• Self-addressed postcards to send to the presidents of NBC, ABC and CBS. On the back of the postcards is written: "My immediate reaction to (your network's) television program: " space then is provided for the viewer to jot down his comments.

• A list of 15 questions viewers should consider before, during and after watching a television program. "Is violence glorified; is sex exploited?" asks one of the questions the viewer should ponder during a program. "Should I communicate my convictions about this program to advertisers or television people?" asks another that the viewer should consider after a program. The list of questions comes with a sticky back side so it can be affixed to a television set.

• A television evaluation form that individuals or families are to fill out while watching television. The form divides programming into negative and positive categories, and asks that respondents break down objectionable programming in terms of violence, sex, language and alcohol.

The Southern Baptist Convention also took an active role in the "Soap" controversy. The CLC conducted a well-organized campaign to pressure advertisers, encourage members of the denomination to make their views known to local affiliates and sponsors, and supply Baptist publications with names and addresses of sponsors of each episode of "Soap."[52]

* * *

The United Church of Christ office of communications, recognized as one of the pioneers in working for the public interest in radio and television, has carried on a daily relationship with the broadcasting industry, the FCC, Congress and interested citizen groups.[53]

The program of the office of communication, established in 1957, emphasizes four major areas: (1) counseling of local community organizations by office staff and attorneys; (2) teaching community leaders their rights and responsibilities under federal laws; (3) training minority students for careers in broadcasting. (4) participating in rulemaking functions and other decisions of the FCC.[54] In this latter area the church is seeking to get Congress to revise the Federal Communications Act of 1934 to require that networks prescreen programs locally for stations and local groups.[55]

The office of communication also played a key role in the "Soap" controversy, although the United Church of Christ was not one of the denominations to drive advertisers away from the show. The Rev. Dr. Everett C. Parker, however, defended (New York **Times,** 8-31-77) the tactic, saying, "There is no reason under the First Amendment why you can't express your views to sponsors. People have a perfect right to speak out. That's what the First Amendment is all about."

In 1977, the office of communication, the Consumers Union and the Consumer Federation of America organized the Telecommunications Consumer Coalition. The TCC serves as an information clearinghouse. It does not take

positions on issues or speak in behalf of its participants. Rather, its purpose is to aid participants by providing information about and calling attention to telecommunications issues and developments that threaten or affect consumer interests.[56]

The TCC currently has 125 participants ranging from such national organizations as the National PTA, National Council of Churches, U.S. Catholic Conference, Union of American Hebrew Congregations and ACT to neighborhood organizations such as Black Citizens for Fair Media in New York City.[57]

* * *

The United Methodist Church has taken an active role in a number of areas in waging the battle against sex and violence on television. The church's communications agency was instrumental, for instance, in creating the Media Action Research Center, the independent research and educational corporation that helps coordinate Television Awareness Training workshops.[58]

The church in the late 1960s broke new ground in initiating a major national letter-writing campaign as part of "TV Evaluation Month." An informational brochure at the time asserted:

> This is a first. Never before has any institution or agency sought such a massive and constructive evaluation of television broadcasting. Upon occasion certain programs, and even some stations, have come under scrutiny for a short period of time. But never like this.

The program called for individual congregations to discuss perceived media problems and provided TV viewer guides to families. Participants were then urged to express their feelings in writing to local stations and networks.[59]

The United Methodist Church's communications agency also has filed briefs with the FCC and purchased stock in the three commercial networks and large companies. As a result of a stockholder action filed by the church with Procter and Gamble and Pillsbury, advertising policies by the companies were changed. But to date, no stockholder actions have been filed with CBS, ABC or RCA, parent company of NBC.[60]

In addition, the church's communications agency has helped fund numerous research projects on violence and sex on television, including the 1979 research by the NCCB, which relates violent programming to advertisers.[61] Activities to date, however, have not included recommending product boycotts or challenging licenses.[62] Both the United Methodist Church and the United Church of Christ have produced numerous pamphlets, fact sheets and resource material, including films, on the problem of violence/sex in television programming and how to combat it.

B: Interdenominational efforts

Television Awareness Training, a 16-hour, self-help course administered through the Media Action Research Center, represents perhaps the most sophisticated attempt yet by religious organizations to deal with the problem of sex/violence in television programming.

The course, developed by the United Methodist Church in cooperation with the American Lutheran Church and the Church of the Brethren, has helped viewers throughout the nation become more discriminating in their TV habits, its proponents say.

TAT is described as a "curriculum to help persons become more aware of the messages of TV, become more creative in the use of television and work for a television system that better serves the needs of the public."[63]

Resource materials include nine films and a 304-page text/workbook; the workshop design consists of eight two-hour sessions. More than 450 persons have become accredited TAT leaders to meet the growing demand for workshops, which, because of cost and length, are available for large groups only.[64]

Numerous denominations, including the Missouri Synod Lutherans, the Episcopalians and various agencies within the Catholic Church, have lauded the program and urged members to participate in it.

* * *

Creating alternative programming is another way churches have responded to the perceived problem. "Six American Families," a series of six one-hour programs shown on PBS and Westinghouse (Group W) television stations beginning in April 1977, was conceived as a bicentennial offering by the United Church of Christ and the United Methodist Church.[65]

The prime-time project, later supported by eight other denominations, was the work of the Rev. Dr. Everett Parker and Curtis Chambers, executive secretary of the United Methodist Church communications agency. The goal, said Parker, was "to focus our vision on the future and its hopes — not to forget the past or to obscure its heroes and lessons, but to illustrate through persons living today the moral fortitude that has been America's greatest strength and most precious asset."[66]

The show featured six families representing differences in American life — six families from different social, economic, geographic and ethnic backgrounds, all wrestling with problems facing millions of others daily.[67]

To facilitate viewing, the participating churches offered a "behind-the-scenes" book and a viewing guide for home use.[68]

C: Efforts of Religious Special Interest Groups

Although Morality in Media's express purpose is to fight distribution of obscene material, the organization, founded in 1962 by three clergymen, has participated in the fight against sex/violence on television.

In September 1975, the organization urged (Kansas City **Star**, 9-18-75) the FCC to hold nationwide hearings on "gratuitous sex and violence" on TV.

The organization also requested its 45,000 members to write the presidents of the largest television advertisers urging them not to advertise on programs with "gratuitous sex and violence."

In 1978 the organization filed a complaint with the FCC against the renewal of the license of WGBH-TV in Boston. Citing several programs (including "Masterpiece Theatre"), Morality in Media claimed WGBH-TV telecasts contained "offensive, vulgar and material otherwise harmful to children" and other programs contained profanity, obscenities and nudity.[69]

Morality in Media also sponsored (Kansas City **Times**, 5-23-78) a television blackout day on May 23, 1978, as a protest against what it saw to be as an increase in sex on TV in the 1978 fall season.

* * *

One of the more vocal critics of televison programming has

been the Rev. Don Wildmon, a United Methodist minister from Tupelo, Miss., who heads the 10,000-member National Federation for Decency.

The NFD, organized in early 1977, has sponsored numerous protest actions against sponsors and networks, the first being a "Turn the TV Off Week" in spring of 1977. Wildmon estimated that at least a million persons turned off their sets in support of the protest.[70]

Wildmon has shunned selective viewing and letter-writing campaigns in favor of boycotting sponsors of programs he finds offensive and irresponsible. In July 1978, the NFD staged a mass picketing of the Ford Motor Co. Earlier in the year, the NFD took aim at Sears Roebuck, organizing a day of picketing at Sears headquarters and urging NFD members to cut their Sears charge cards in half and send them to the company.[71]

Sears began pulling some of its television advertisements from disputed shows the same day the NFD pickets went up, but company spokesmen said their consciences were raised long before the protest action.[72] It should be noted that similar action against Kentucky Fried Chicken brought different results. The NFD was told Kentucky Fried Chicken was not going to bend to pressure.[73]

More recently, Wildmon abandoned boycott tactics in favor of a mail campaign to protest CBS's "Flesh and Blood," the four-hour show that dealt in part with incest. Wildmon mobilized a letter-writing campaign that resulted in more than 10,000 letters of protest to CBS. Letters also were sent to TV's top 250 corporate advertisers, suggesting they think carefully before sponsoring the series.[74]

Effects, achievements

Religious organizations, as part of the overall national movement to combat sex/violence on television, have proved effective. Of the 22 new weekly series the three networks introduced at the midpoint of the 1978-79, not one dealt with violence or sexual titillation.[75] "What made this new policy a matter of extraordinary interest," said New York **Times** television critic Les Brown, "was that it represented a turning away from flavorings that had pervaded prime-time television for two decades."

Grant Tinker, head of MTM productions (producer of the "Lou Grant Show"), told the Association of National Advertisers " . . . there's no question a certain sanitizing has taken place. Pressure groups indeed, have had an effect."[76]

To a large extent, the national movement has succeeded in reducing the amount of violence on television. But sex is a different story. Few people were willing to make a case for more video violence; there was sufficient evidence pointing to some kind of relationship between TV violence and anti-social behavior. But there is almost no available evidence to show how much influence video sex has on children or adults.[77]

Religious organizations have proven they can effectively mount organized campaigns and effect change in the media. The "Soap" experience brought home the effectiveness of pressuring advertisers. Likewise, Wildmon's campaign against Sears succeeded due to its economic emphasis and utilization of the print media.

Conclusion

Whether religious organizations remain influential in combating sex/violence on television remains to be seen. The gains, to a large degree, have been achieved by a willingness of advertisers to quit sponsoring violent or sexually titillating shows. If religious organizations no longer can muster enough economic clout to press their demands, then advertisers may well ignore their pleas.

Television programming remains tied to profitability, not to taste. As NBC chief programmer Paul Klein said (Boston **Globe**, 12-5-77) in a newspaper interview, "Nobody gets fired for bad taste. They get fired for losing money. The day violence isn't profitable, it will stop." Similarly, television executives disagree that TV should set ethical standards. In response to a question in Family Weekly's "Ask Them Yourself" column, Gene G. Jankowski, president of CBS Broadcast Group, said it is the role of the church, the school and the family to set a moral tone: "Television is on the cutting edge of political change, but it should neither lead nor lag too far behind that change. As a broadcaster, a citizen and as a father, I would object to TV having that role."[78]

Although religious organizations have effected change in television programming, one can safely say that they have had little or no effect on the three commercial networks. "I do not believe any church is exerting any control on the networks," said Nelson Price of the United Methodist Church. "The only possible controls in my judgment are from within the networks themselves, advertisers, public opinion, and to a small degree, the FCC and FTC."[79]

FOOTNOTES

1. Stewart Hoover, "Warning: TV May Be Bad For Your Health," **A.D.**, May 1978, p. 29.
2. **Advertising Age**, Nov. 14, 1977, p. 1. (Silverman at the time was entertainment chief at ABC).
3. **Report of the Royal Commission on Violence in the Communications Industry:** Vol. 4, p. 79.
4. **Ibid.**
5. **Ibid.**
6. **Ibid.**
7. **Ibid.**, p. 79-80.
8. **Ibid.**, p. 80.
9. Les Brown, **Keeping Your Eye on Television** (New York: The Pilgrim Press, 1979), p. 57-58.
10. Maurice L. Draper, director public affairs division of Reorganized Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints, letter to author, Nov. 12, 1979.
11. Morton H. Smith, spokesman for Presbyterian Church in America, letter to author, Oct. 15, 1979.
12. Ralph R. Monsen, director of chaplaincy and administrative services, Conservative Baptist Association of America, letter to author, Oct. 18, 1979.
13. A.W. Phinney, manager, committee on publications, First Church of Christ Scientist, letter to author, Oct. 18, 1979.
14. Charles Gibbs, assistant director of press relations-electronic media, Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints, tape cassette sent to author, Oct. 10, 1979.
15. **Ibid.**
16. **Ibid.**
17. Copy of Resolution No. 7731, Christian Church (Disciples of Christ).
18. **Ibid.**
19. Resolution "To Express Concern for Moral Standards," Lutheran Church — Missouri Synod.
20. **Ibid.**
21. Victor Cooper, associate director of the communication department, Seventh-day Adventist Church, letter sent to author, Oct. 15, 1979.
22. **Ibid.**
23. Resolution "Violence, Its Cause and Cure," Episcopal Church.
24. Margaret E. Green, communication division, Episcopal Church, letter to author, Oct. 16, 1979.
25. United Methodist Church resolution "The Church in a Mass Media Culture," distributed by church as brochure.
26. **Ibid.**
27. **Ibid.**
28. Harry N. Hollis Jr., director of family and special moral concerns, Christian Life Commission, Southern Baptist Convention, letter to author, Oct. 10, 1979.
29. "United Church Takes on Mission Against Sex and Violence on TV," **Broadcasting**, April 11, 1977, p. 49.
30. **Ibid.**
31. Eugene McCarthy, "Sins of Omission," **Harper's**, June 1977, p. 92.
32. Brown, Keeping Your Eye on Television, p. 70-71.
33. **Science News**, Vol. 101, April 1, 1972, p. 214.
34. **Weekly Television Digest with Consumer Electronics**, Jan. 17, 1972, p. 1.
35. **Weekly Television Digest with Consumer Electronics**, Jan. 14, 1976, p. 2.
36. **Weekly Television Digest with Consumer Electronics**, Nov. 29, 1976, p. 5.
37. **Broadcasting**, Feb. 6, 1978, p. 54.

38. **Broadcasting**, May 27, 1977, p. 50.
39. Freedom of Information Center Report Nov. 387, "Television's 'Soap' Controversy," by Brent Stutzman, "Summary," p. 1.
40. **Ibid.**, p. 3.
41. **Lutheran Witness**, October 1979, p. 19.
42. Copy of proposed resolution sent to author by Margaret E. Green.
43. Phinney letter.
44. Resolution No. 7731, Christian Church (Disciples of Christ).
45. Robert B. Beusse and Russell Shaw, "Maude's Abortion: Spontaneous or Induced?", **America**, Nov. 3, 1973, p. 324-326.
46. Freedom of Information Center Report No. 387, p. 4, attributed to public statement, Aug. 8, 1977, by United States Catholic Conference.
47. **Weekly Television Digest with Consumer Electronics**, Sept. 22, 1975, p. 4.
48. **Weekly Television Digest with Consumer Electronics**, May 24, 1978, p. 5.
49. **Weekly Television Digest with Consumer Electronics**, Aug. 29, 1977, p. 2-3.
50. "Help for TV Viewers," brochure No. 1.
51. "Help for TV Viewers," brochure No. 3.
52. Freedom of Information Center Report No. 387, p. 4, attributed to letter to Brent Stutzman by Harry N. Hollis Jr., Oct. 19, 1977.
53. "Keeping You Posted," information sheet sent from the United Church of Christ March 15, 1978, p. 3.
54. United Church of Christ "Expolitative Broadcasting Practices" resolution.
55. "Keeping You Posted," March 15, 1978, p. 3.
56. Information sheet supplied by United Church of Christ with letter dated Oct. 31, 1979.
57. Janice M. Engsberg, field director, office of communication, United Church of Christ, Oct. 31, 1979, letter to author.
58. Nelson Price, director, public media division, United Methodist Communiations, letter to author, Nov. 26, 1979.
59. United Methodist Church informational brochure.
60. Price letter.
61. **Ibid.**
62. **Ibid.**
63. **Ibid.**
64. Statement of purpose and activities of Media Action Research Center.
65. "6 American Families," Thomas O. Bentz, A.D., February 1977, p. 23-29.
66. **Ibid.**
67. **Ibid.**
68. **Ibid.**
69. **Weekly Television Digest with Consumer Electronics**, July 17, 1978, p. 2.
70. Morality in Media newsletter, November 1977, p. 4.
71. Susan Schiefelbein, "Guardians of the Airwaves," **Saturday Review**, Sept. 16, 1978, p. 26-28.
72. **Ibid.**
73. "Does Incest Belong on TV?", **Newsweek**, Oct. 8, 1979, p. 101-102.
74. **Ibid.**
75. Brown, Keeping Your Eye on Television, p. 67.
76. **Advertising Age**, Nov. 14, 1977, p. 1-2.
77. "Sex and TV," Newsweek, Feb. 20, 1978, p. 55-61.
78. "Ask Them Yourself," **Family Weekly**, Nov. 18, 1979, p. 2.
79. Price letter.

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